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French Merchants in Buenos Aires (1816-1825): Economic Opportunities and Difficulties during the Wars of Independence

Abstract

Unlike other foreigners, the French merchants who migrated to Hispanic America in the 19th century have received little attention, partly because they are supposed to have been few. With the emancipation of the River Plate, the Declaration of Independence in 1816 and the end of the Spanish commercial monopoly – and despite many difficulties due to revolutionary turmoil – some French merchants saw the legal opening of the *rioplatense* market as an opportunity and became more present in Buenos Aires, although less than their British counterparts.

Building upon the Buenos Aires commercial court's records and data from censuses, this paper sheds light on the French commercial presence in Buenos Aires during the Independence and civil wars, which hampered the circulation of credit instruments, the fluidity of credit relations, and business activities. It shows the importance of merchants' private initiatives in consolidating the French presence, and how they coped with wartime consequences. Whereas those who were poorly integrated into local society were vulnerable in these times of crisis, others benefited from close relations within the local society and acquired economic and social prominence. Such integration may have contributed to making them key interlocutors for French authorities as they manifested an increased interest in the River Plate in the context of the post-1815 imperial reconfigurations, when international and European rivalries continued in Hispanic America, particularly between France and Britain.

Keywords: French Merchants, Buenos Aires, Independence Wars, trade, credit, foreigners, Antoine François Leloir, François Touchard

Comerciantes franceses en Buenos Aires (1816-1825): oportunidades económicas y dificultades durante las guerras de Independencia

Resumen

A diferencia de otros extranjeros, los comerciantes franceses que migraron a Hispanoamérica en el siglo XIX han recibido escasa atención, en parte porque se supone que habían sido una pequeña minoría. Con la emancipación del Río de la Plata, la declaración de Independencia en 1816 y el fin del monopolio comercial español (y a pesar de las muchas dificultades debidas a la tormenta política revolucionaria), algunos comerciantes franceses vieron la apertura legal del mercado rioplatense como una oportunidad, e incrementaron su presencia en Buenos Aires, siempre en menor medida que sus colegas británicos. A partir de los registros del Tribunal de Comercio y datos de censos, este trabajo arroja luz sobre la presencia comercial francesa en Buenos Aires durante la Independencia y las guerras civiles, que obstaculizaron la circulación de instrumentos de crédito, la fluidez de las relaciones crediticias, y las actividades de negocios. Muestra, también, la importancia de las iniciativas privadas mercantiles en la consolidación de la presencia francesa, y cómo los comerciantes franceses se enfrentaron con las consecuencias derivadas de las circunstancias bélicas. Mientras que los que estaban poco integrados en el contexto social rioplatense fueron vulnerables en aquellos tiempos de crisis, otros sobrevivieron mejor por su proximidad e integración en la sociedad local, y lograron relevancia económica y social. Tal integración pudo haber contribuido a hacerles interlocutores estratégicos para las autoridades francesas al manifestar estas un creciente interés en el Río de la Plata en los años de reconfiguraciones imperiales posteriores a 1815, cuando las rivalidades internacionales y europeas continuaron en Hispanoamérica, particularmente entre Francia y Gran Bretaña.

Palabras clave: comerciantes franceses, Buenos Aires, Guerras de Independencia, comercio, crédito, extranjeros, Antoine François Leloir, François Touchard

Comerciants francesos a Buenos Aires (1816-1825): oportunitats econòmiques i dificultats durant les guerres d'Independència

Resum

A diferència d'altres estrangers, els comerciants francesos que van migrar a Hispanoamèrica al segle XIX han rebut una atenció escassa, en part perquè se suposa que havien estat una petita minoria. Amb l'emancipació del Río de la Plata, la declaració d'Independència el 1816 i la fi del monopoli comercial espanyol (i malgrat les moltes dificultats a causa de la tempesta política revolucionària), alguns comerciants francesos van veure l'obertura legal del mercat *rioplatense* com una oportunitat, i van incrementar la seva presència a Buenos Aires, sempre en menor mesura que els seus col·legues britànics. A partir dels registres del Tribunal de Comerç i dades de censos, aquest treball dilucida la presència comercial francesa a Buenos Aires durant la Independència i les guerres civils, que van obstaculitzar la circulació d'instruments de crèdit, la fluïdesa de les relacions creditícies, i les activitats de negocis. Mostra, també, la importància de les iniciatives privades mercantils en la consolidació de la presència francesa, i com els comerciants francesos es van enfrontar a les conseqüències derivades de les circumstàncies bèl·liques. Mentre que aquells que estaven poc integrats en el context social del Río de la Plata van ser vulnerables en temps de crisi, d'altres van sobreviure-hi millor per la seva proximitat i integració en la societat local, i van aconseguir rellevància econòmica i social. Tal integració podria haver contribuït a fer-los interlocutors estratègics per a les autoritats franceses en manifestar aquestes un creixent interès pel Río de la Plata en els anys de reconfiguracions imperials posteriors a 1815, quan les rivalitats internacionals i europees van continuar a Hispanoamèrica, particularment entre França i la Gran Bretanya.

Paraules clau: comerciants francesos, Buenos Aires, Guerres d'Independència, comerç, crèdit, estrangers, Antoine François Leloir, François Touchard

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1. Introduction

In April 1821, Antoine François Leloir, an important French merchant in Buenos Aires, sued a French company in the Buenos Aires commercial court for payment of a bill of exchange. Leloir returned several months later to the court to demand to his creditors a suspension or delay of payments. In June, François Touchard, a French merchant with a former career in the French administration, reported to the court the difficulties he had faced in setting up his business in Buenos Aires in 1818.¹ Although Leloir and Touchard were unevenly integrated into local society, they both underwent the sharp consequences of the 1817-1820 political, institutional and military crisis launched when the military situation got worse with the Portuguese invasion of the Banda Oriental and the threat of a Spanish reconquest expedition. They were added to the conflicts between the Directory and the governors of the Littoral provinces: in Buenos Aires, the Directory regime's political legitimacy was undermined, which increased opposition in the capital and the provinces of the River Plate (Verdo 2006, 358).

This crisis affected the circulation of credit instruments, credit relations and business activities. Similarly, the French traders operating in the River Plate suffered from economic difficulties caused by the Independence Wars.² Nevertheless, their experiences illustrate the opportunities generated during the period for foreign merchants, whose private initiatives helped to develop the French presence in the River Plate.

Unlike the Spanish, Portuguese, British, North American, Genoese and Sardinian merchants who migrated to Hispanic America during the colonial (Brilli 2016; Cristóforis 2009; Pearce

¹ Archivo General de la Nación de Argentina (AGN), Sala IX, Tribunal comercial La Reja (TC), P-259, *Peronard contra Touchard*, 1821, f. 18-19v.

² I will refer to "Independence Wars" for the sake of effective writing, yet wars that troubled the River Plate during the period were also civil conflicts whose protagonists did not urge for independence at the same time and in the same way, as well as conflicts implying European powers. On the characterization of these wars, see Fradkin (2010) and Blaufarb (2007).

2007; Socolow 2009; Stein and Stein 2009) and independence periods (Reber 1979; Besseghini 2020a); the French who immigrated or temporarily stayed in Hispanic America during the 19th century have received little attention. Historians agree that their presence increased in Buenos Aires, Montevideo and the interior territories, as well as in other Hispanic American provinces, as a result of the legal opening of the *rioplatense* market to foreign merchants. Some calls were made to encourage the study of French merchants in the Americas at the time (Weil 2000; Otero 2012). As Fernando Jumar highlights (1998), they had previously participated in the River Plate commerce, both within the legal limits of the Spanish colonial commercial system and through contraband. This led to a renewed interest in the French presence in the region, in the broader frame of the imperial reconfigurations at work between the end of the 18th century and the last decades of the 19th century (Thibaud 2018; Todd 2011 and 2021). The revolutionary cycle, which began in the Viceroyalty of the River Plate in 1808-1809, was crucial for the immigration of French individuals, as well as for French geopolitical interests, before the establishment of French general inspectors of commerce in 1825, and of consulates in Montevideo (1826) and Buenos Aires (1827).

The emancipation of the River Plate from the Spanish rule and the Declaration of Independence in 1816 put an end to the Spanish trade monopoly system in force during the colonial period. It had already loosened before, with the decrees of 1778, and the authorization of free trade with Neutrals in 1797, before the broader authorization granted by the viceroy Baltasar Hidalgo de Cisneros in 1809. As these measures relaxed the monopoly system, foreign merchants increased their presence and trade developed between the River Plate and the North Atlantic economies (Halperín Donghi 2002; Brown 2002; Hora 2010). The Anglo-Spanish War from 1796 – and the resulting Franco-Spanish alliance – had also contributed to increasing French commercial presence by hindering direct trade between Spain and the River Plate and encouraging the use

of neutral and foreign ships, thereby allowing French merchants to enter the River Plate (Ortiz de la Tabla and Ducasse 1999; Schnakenbourg 2015; Schlez 2019). Spanish-American colonies' changing alliances in favor of Britain, and political, logistical and economic turmoil caused by the Napoleonic military occupation of the Iberian Peninsula, forestalled the French presence from 1808 onwards, but the revolutionary wars and the 1816 Declaration of Independence of the United Provinces of the River Plate again opened up the region to French merchants. They were all the more encouraged to do so as France got more involved in the River Plate geopolitical matters while, after 1815, international relations and imperial ambitions reconfigured in the Atlantic and European rivalries continued in Hispanic America, particularly between France and Britain. While British traders operating in the River Plate contributed to further British interests in the region, French merchants who settled there urged French authorities for recognition of the newly independent Spanish American republics, and some became key players in the development of France's influence in the region. This was the case with Antoine François Leloir, considered as the French merchants' representative in Buenos Aires in December 1817 (Belgrano 1933).³

This article addresses the French merchants' integration into local and regional economies, taking into account historical demography, migration history and Atlantic economic history. It focuses on some French individuals involved in the commerce with Buenos Aires, including immigrants and temporary sojourners in the River Plate, as well as merchants located in France.

³ This article focuses on the socio-economic aspects of the French presence in Buenos Aires. It does not delve into the modalities of France's geopolitical influence in the region. The political influence of Napoleon and of the French monarchy in Spanish America is discussed in Belgrano 1933, Robertson 1967, Blaufarb 2007, Todd 2011 and 2021, Besseghini 2018, Gutiérrez Ardila 2019, Mellone 2020. It manifested with France's role as a mediator in the resolution of the conflicts in the Banda Oriental (1816-1819), and the project of a constitutional monarchy in Buenos Aires (1817-1819). Whereas French Bourbon monarchy's attitude towards Ferdinand VII of Spain, determined by the Bourbon family ties, prevented any recognition of the River Plate's independence, preparations for such a recognition grew, within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Paris, before Louis-Philippe's arrival in 1830 changed the geopolitical situation and gave more political support to French merchants in Buenos Aires.

However, despite the legal opening of the River Plate, commerce was not easy. Thus, how did French merchants reinforce their presence in the River Plate market during the Wars of Independence, which generated opportunities but also increased risks? The examples of Touchard and Leloir suggest that French merchants' uneven integration into local society made them more or less vulnerable to wartime consequences. Despite revolutionary turmoil, merchants benefiting from a solid social capital could partake more successfully in the River Plate market than traders who had to build relations of solidarity and new networks. Drawing from the study of various French individuals, the article examines how new economic relations were articulated with the businesses of well-established French merchants in Buenos Aires.

This study analyzes trial records produced by the Buenos Aires commercial court, which involve French merchants as plaintiffs and/or defendants, between 1816 and 1825. The latter year saw the beginnings of a new time of crisis, marked by the war with Brazil, naval blockades, and the on-going conflicts between the Congress political factions.⁴ These trial records were selected from a larger corpus involving French merchants up to 1840, identified through a twofold search: by examining another larger corpus of trials randomly constituted with the inventory of the collection; and by looking for French individuals' names in censuses. The commercial court's records make it possible to know these French merchants at a time when documents concerning them are scattered and heterogeneous, especially because it was not unusual for them to deal with the commercial court. It is not easy to identify French merchants in coeval primary sources. General statistics on French emigration flows became available only by mid-19th century (Otero 2012, 28). Studies on previous decades are based on statistics of

⁴ In Buenos Aires, from the end of 1825, tensions increased in the Congress, which became polarized by two main political factions: the supporters of Bernardino Rivadavia, elected president in 1826, wanted to establish a unitary and centralized government, whereas the opposition favored a government that respected the provinces' sovereignty (Ternavasio 2009, 152).

movements in the main departure ports, on diplomatic archives, and on French consulates' archives (register of births, marriages and deaths, correspondences), that we do not have for the River Plate before 1826 (Bonnain 2020). Local censuses, though incomplete and difficult to access, give an overview of the demography and sociology of French residents in Buenos Aires.

2. French merchants in the newly independent River Plate

2.1. *The growing number of French immigrants and merchants in Buenos Aires*

The revolutionary period encouraged foreign merchants to trade with the River Plate. While immigration had become a major factor of the demographic growth of Buenos Aires since the mid-18th century, French merchants became more numerous (Halperín Donghi 2002; Fradkin and Garavaglia 2004, 10; Massé 1992; Hora 2010; Dmitruk 2016). Whereas historians agree on the relevant French presence in Montevideo and Buenos Aires in the 1830s, we know little about French merchants in previous decades. The available numbers on immigration in Buenos Aires before the outbreak of the war with Brazil in 1825 come from the analysis of censuses: the 1810, 1822 and 1827 censuses make possible some estimations regarding the number of immigrants in Buenos Aires, and of French people among them. In 1810, Buenos Aires gathered between 42,800 inhabitants, a number derived from the 1810 census, and 76,450 inhabitants, as proposed by Lyman Johnson; in 1825 it counted more than 55,000 inhabitants (García Belsunce 1976; Johnson 2011, 30). The city still gathered about half the population living in the province of Buenos Aires. According to the 1822 census, immigrants, defined as those who were born outside the current Argentine territory, represented 7% of the urban population. Other authors present higher estimates based on the 1827 census, using samples and a more inclusive definition of the category “immigrants”, taking into account all persons born outside the city of Buenos Aires. Immigrants would thus amount to more than a quarter of the city's population in 1827 (Di Meglio 2006; Dmitruk 2016).

Immigrants' geographical origins changed over the period: while Spanish immigration slowed down after the Wars of Independence, French immigration accelerated and ended up representing the third largest group of European immigrants behind the Spanish and the British, although we must underline the presence of Portuguese and of immigrants from the Italian peninsula. While British immigrants represented 18% of Buenos Aires' European immigrant population in the 1827 census, French immigrants represented 14%, and Spanish migrants dominated the immigration flows in Buenos Aires. In absolute numbers, French immigrants were few: 584 in 1827.⁵ In contrast with this lesser calculation, Benito Díaz (1960) estimated that the French in Buenos Aires amounted to 4,500-5,000 in 1836, a top hypothesis. Such a contrast is understandable if one takes into account that the River Plate was not yet a popular destination for the French emigrating overseas, though the trend of French immigration was growing. Moreover, whereas Díaz based his estimates upon the *Gaceta mercantil*, French immigrants were under-registered in the early 19th century censuses. Despite these few numbers suggested by the 1827 census, French presence played an important role into the society and economy of Buenos Aires (Djenderejian 2008). French immigration continued to accelerate thereafter and historians highlight the quantitative leap of the 1830s, in a new diplomatic context: the arrival of Louis-Philippe changed France's attitude towards the recognition of the independence, permitting to negotiate commercial treaties⁶ (Schneider 1977, 71; Hora 2010, 66; Otero 2012).

⁵ I calculated these numbers thanks to Luis Pablo Dmitruk's database constituted from the 1827 census. I thank him deeply for sharing his work with me.

⁶ Further research would permit to sum up the existing estimates, formulated thanks to different sources, regarding French immigration and commerce in Buenos Aires and Montevideo in the first half of the 19th Century. Jürgen Schneider concluded that 187 ships went out of French ports towards Buenos Aires and Montevideo between 1827 and 1834. According to Roy Hora, between 1821 and 1830, 9% of the annual arrivals of overseas ships in Buenos Aires were French, among the 288 overseas ships arrived. This was the third flow behind British and North-American ships.



French immigrants were mostly men between their 20s and 40s, whose activities developed in various sectors, mainly trade, handicraft production, liberal professions and farming. The data collected by Luis Pablo Dmitruk from the 1827 census suggest several conclusions. On average, the French people surveyed had been present in Buenos Aires for 5 years, giving us an insight upon the end of the period under study: over half of them were skilled workers (mainly carpenters, hatters, blacksmiths, tailors, dyers, masons, gunsmiths), 19% worked as merchants and 10% were unskilled workers. However, there was no sharp distinction between trade and production, and economic agents diversified their activities. The word “commerce”, in short, had a very broad meaning. That is why we must underline the greater proportion of traders among French immigrants. Furthermore, even if the French inhabitants registered in the 1827 census specified their activity, they considered themselves as part of the “*comercio de Buenos Aires*” when appearing before the commercial court, and are presented sometimes both as merchants and under other categories in Blondel’s almanac. In short, although the French was not the largest immigrant community in the River Plate before 1830, their presence was growing and they played a significant role in Buenos Aires, as evidenced by the commercial court’s archives.

2.2. French merchants: immigrants, commission agents and transients

The court’s records allow us to identify French traders who resided in Buenos Aires, surveyed in the 1827 census, as well as those who were not registered: some merchants passed through, like ship captains; some went back to France before the 1827 census but had settled for a while; others avoided the census for fear of enlistment, and others traded with the River Plate merchants from their residence in France and never settled in Buenos Aires. Thus, it is possible to examine the modalities of French commercial presence in Buenos Aires beyond the sole merchants who settled in the city.

Some of those settled in Buenos Aires participated in the Atlantic trade. Their practices were typical of such trade, whose agents, infrastructures and facilities have been described by Atlantic economic history since the 1990s: they were associates in partnerships specialized in consignment trade, such as Roquin, Meyer & Co., one of the main French trading firms in Buenos Aires during the 1820s;⁷ and Mendeville, Loreilhe & Co., a company specialized in French products' importation and founded by Edouard Loreilhe and Jean-Baptiste Washington de Mendeville. Others, while engaging themselves in local manufacturing or trade, participated in the Atlantic trade as consignees, charterers, shippers, ship-owners, or contracted joint ownerships of vessels. In short, they diversified their activities. French merchants also operated in regional trade, both an outlet and a source of supply for various products, together with merchants from the interior of the River Plate, Montevideo, Brazil, Santiago de Chile and, less frequently, Paraguay. Others ran workshops: Juan Pedro Varangot was among the owners of the main Buenos Aires hat workshop since 1810, and imported coal from the Córdoba region (Mariluz Urquijo 2002, 325-326; Beraud and Mariño 2012);⁸ Blas Despouy had a tannery and a leather and tallow factory in Barracas.⁹ Others opened warehouses for wholesale trade, shops and *pulperías*,¹⁰ where they sold products imported from France, among other goods. These merchants diversified their activities, changed of activity over time, and maintained business relations with merchants from adjacent territories, particularly Santiago and Montevideo. They relied on representatives in these territories, although they also travelled there themselves. Mendeville, Loreilhe & Co. had a business agent in Montevideo, the Frenchman

⁷ AGN, TC, L-145, *Capitán y consignatarios del bergantín francés Intrepido*, 1823; Love 1825, 52.

⁸ AGN, TC, L-144, *Letamendi contra Varangot*, 1817; V-404, *Varangot contra Rosales*, 1816; V-406, *Vaca contra Varangot*, 1824. The term “*fábrica*” appears in judicial sources, yet following Love’s testimony and Mariluz Urquijo’s analysis this can be considered a workshop.

⁹ AGN, TC, L-145, *Leloir contra Despouy*, 1821.

¹⁰ According to the 1826 Almanac (Blondel 1826), *pulperías* were shops where everything that made daily life possible, especially drinks and food, was sold in retail. They were also important places of sociability, and differed from *tiendas*, which used to sell all kinds of goods, except drinks and food, in both wholesale and retail.

Deleyderryier;¹¹ François Touchard went to Chile to trade yerba mate from Paraguay where he was in relation with the Frenchman J. Goudy.¹²

Archives provide information on the products traded by French merchants, who exported to France leather, horsehair, tallow and the like, while importing products that were more expensive than British goods, including clothing, accessories and delicate fabrics, such as hats and shoes, but also kitchenware, porcelain, and alcohol (Hora 2010, 35-38; Halperín Donghi 2002, 76-122).

Some French merchants established in Buenos Aires, while others were sojourners. The town was a hub for traders who migrated or travelled to other territories of South America, and a stopover for ship captains and merchants wishing to return to France. Jean Lasvignes, also known as Juan Laviña, by his Spanish name, represented and managed in Santiago the commercial interests of Tomás O’Gorman Sr after he left Chile for Lima and then Spain, where he died around 1810. After O’Gorman’s death, Lasvignes kept on managing the business in Chile and communicated information to Tomás O’Gorman’s wife, Ana Périchon, who lived near Buenos Aires with her son Thomas.¹³ In 1819 he stopped in Buenos Aires in order to return to France, which urged Thomas O’Gorman Jr., in November 1819, to refer to the commercial court, on behalf of his mother, asking that Lasvignes not to leave the city until he named a representative.¹⁴

As for sojourners, this is the case of salesmen commissioned by companies in France that sought to develop their relations with River Plate merchants. Eleonor Foiron, for instance, settled in

¹¹ AGN, TC, M-181, *Mendeville, Loreilhe y Cia contra Chavarivière*, 1826, f.1.

¹² AGN, TC, P-259, *Peronard contra Touchard*, 1821, f. 86.

¹³ In the archives, the father is named Tomás, and his son Thomas.

¹⁴ AGN, TC, O-230, *O’Gorman contra Laviña*, 1819; on Tomás O’Gorman’s business in Chile and Peru, and on Ana Périchon, see: Besseghini 2020b.

Buenos Aires as agent of Lamotte, Maillet & Co., from St-Valéry-sur-Somme, until January 1821. Foiron's presence was crucial in allowing the company to enter the River Plate market, participate in credit relations involving French merchants across the Atlantic, and settle debts that resulted from the company's business. Indeed, on December 10, 1819, Foiron drew a bill of exchange to be paid in Paris by Lamotte, Maillet & Co., to the order of the Buenos Aires French company Roquin, Meyer & Co. By this credit instrument and means of payment, Foiron sought to settle his company's debts in favor of Roquin, Meyer & Co.¹⁵ The next day, the company endorsed the bill to Lasvignes, who was to embark for France the same week.¹⁶ This credit relation was thus established thanks to Lamotte, Maillet & Co.'s salesman's sojourn in Buenos Aires, and to Lasvignes' mobility between Chile, Buenos Aires and France. This suggests how important personal interactions and interdependencies, emerging within the port's social and economic space, were for the development of long-distance exchanges (Moutoukias 2016). Thus, credit networks, salesmen, and other agents sent overseas (Bartolomei 2012), together with infrastructures, allowed merchants established in France to enter the regional market.

Transatlantic partnerships, whose associates were located both in France and Buenos Aires, were also a means to get through the Buenos Aires market, and sometimes encouraged the migration of partners from France. This was the case of Jean-Victor Peronard, who partnered with another French merchant to establish a trading house in Buenos Aires. After their company's bankruptcy, Peronard, who had remained in Paris while his partner managed the Buenos Aires house, arrived in the city to settle the dispute with his partner before the commercial court, and then settled in Buenos Aires and managed a *pulpería*. All these French

¹⁵ AGN, TC, L-145, *Leloir contra Meyer*, 1821.

¹⁶ AGN, TC, O-230, *O'Gorman contra Laviña*, 1819.



merchants, both those who settled down and those who stayed only temporarily, regarded the River Plate market, now legally open to foreign traders, as a space for economic opportunity.

2.3. French merchants within credit networks

The analysis of lawsuits' records reveals a more detailed picture of the credit relations established by French agents involved in regional and Atlantic trade. Some of them in particular articulated these credit networks within a circumscribed geography. French merchants who resided in Buenos Aires had business partners in France, namely in Marseille, Paris and the Paris basin (Reims, Amiens, St-Valéry-sur-Somme), Bordeaux and Le Havre.

Although French merchants in Buenos Aires often turned to their compatriots to establish business relations, their integration into local society, and the credit they acquired, enabled them to diversify their sources of credit, relying on local and British merchants. The records of the proceedings started by Antoine François Leloir before the commercial court reveal his credit relations. In September 1821, he added to his petition for a suspension of payments or a 6-year delay a statement of his debts and assets, as summarized below. Although his debtors were concentrated in the River Plate (mainly in Buenos Aires, but also in Mendoza and Tucumán) and Chile, the list of his creditors shows that his union with the Sáenz Valiente family had been crucial for his integration into the local society and the establishment of his business. It also suggests the importance of his business relations in France.

TABLE 1. Antoine François Leloir's creditors according to location, 1821

Location	Amount (pesos)	% in the total of the creditors' assets	% among the assets from a same location
Buenos Aires	23,295	57	100,0
Sebastiana Sáenz Valiente	16,219	40	69,6
Parish Robertson y Cía	2,000	5	8,6
Ambrosio Lezica	991	2	4,3
Francisco Delgado	975	2	4,2
Julián Panelo	883	2	3,8
Pedro Ponce	740	2	3,2
Braulio Costa	476	1	2,0
Brown Buchanan y Cía	272	1	1,2
Juan Pablo Sáenz Valiente	220	1	0,9
Félix Álzaga	209	1	0,9
Ruperto Albarellos	200	0	0,9
Pedro Corpet	110	0	0,5
France	10,212	25	100,0
Don Juan Bautista Laurent Padre e hijos (Amiens)	7,046	17	69,0
Bernadac Regny y Cía (Marseille)	2,369	6	23,2
Viuda Henriot e hijos (Reims)	539	1	5,3
Lamothe Maillet y Cía (St-Valéry-sur-Somme)	171	0	1,7
Henry (Paris)	87	0	0,9
Rio Janeiro	6,922	17	
Lizaur, Josef Agustín	6,922	17	
Londres	367	1	
Hullett Hermanos y Cía	367	1	
Total	40,796	100	

Source: personal production on the basis of AGN, L-145, *Don Antonio Francisco Leloir y sus acreedores*, f1, Statement of Leloir's debts and assets, September 20, 1821. The amount of the creditors' assets has been rounded off to the peso.

Of Leloir's debts, 40% consisted of his wife *Doña* Sebastiana Sáenz Valiente's credits, which were moreover privileged over those of other creditors, making it all the more difficult for Leloir's creditors to recover their assets.¹⁷ As one of Juan Martín de Pueyrredón's nieces, Sebastiana Sáenz Valiente related Leloir to one of the major families and fortunes of Buenos Aires. A quarter of Leloir's debts were owed to business partners established in France and connected with other French merchants in Buenos Aires. Leloir's creditors distribution more generally illustrates the place he acquired in Buenos Aires society. He was linked to the town's

¹⁷ AGN, TC, L-145, *Don Antonio Francisco Leloir y sus acreedores*, f. 8, report of the creditors' junta of 5 October 1821.

main businessmen and financiers: Juan Pablo Sáenz Valiente, Braulio Costa, and the Parish Robertson brothers would be part of the commission formed by Bernadino Rivadavia in 1823, to obtain a loan in London (Amaral 1984). He was involved in – sometimes unsuccessful – commercial operations in Chile, Paraguay, Brazil, but also in Patagonia, and he participated in the Atlantic trade. Like the Parish Robertson brothers, who permitted the Buenos Aires merchants and government to access to British credits, Leloir played an essential role in developing business relations with French economic agents, including in France. Leloir's distinguished position in Buenos Aires made him a key intermediary in the discussions between the French colonel Le Moyne and Pueyrredón in 1818. Le Moyne had been commissioned by the marquis d'Osmond, Louis XVIII's ambassador in London, to talk with Pueyrredón about the establishment of a constitutional monarchy, as the province continued to oppose to the restauration of Ferdinand VII's authority. By permitting Le Moyne to meet Pueyrredón, Leloir, who also had a correspondence with the duke Richelieu, participated in reinforcing France's geopolitical influence in the River Plate (Belgrano 1933, 41-71; Gutiérrez Ardila 2019). It is therefore unsurprising that, after December 1817, French immigrants in Buenos Aires, Pueyrredón, and perhaps the French government, regarded Leloir as the unofficial French merchants' representative.

3. Revolutionary conflicts and civil wars: the economic difficulties of French merchants

During the 1810s and early 1820s, almost permanent conflicts troubled the River Plate. Like others around them, French traders had to cope with many difficulties.

3.1. Logistical obstacles to trade

Judicial sources contain many traces of the French merchants' difficulties during the period, revealing how wartime consequences hampered business relations and activities. French merchants' businesses were mainly based on import-export trade and involved correspondents

in Buenos Aires, Montevideo, Santiago de Chile and various French localities. During the Napoleonic Wars as France was at war with Great Britain and after the 1808 overturning of alliances, and then because of the Wars of Independence, war hindered navigation, and consequently the delivery of correspondence, credit instruments, products and laborers. For instance, in spite of the business relations established in 1800 between the Bordeaux firm Strobel & Martini and the Buenos Aires merchants José Riera and Francisco Delsar, through the intermediation of José María Riera (José Riera's son, sent as agent to Bordeaux before he returned to Buenos Aires, named Riera hereinafter), the correspondence between Strobel & Martini and Riera ceased between 1801 and 1816. In autumn 1818, Riera denounced the Bordeaux firm's silence before the Buenos Aires commercial court in order to defend himself from the accusations of Strobel & Martini's representative in Buenos Aires, who was trying to recover the company's credit.¹⁸ Appearing before the court, the representative justified this silence by stating that "the continuous wars and great distance from Europe must have contributed to the loss of the correspondence addressed to Riera" or that "the letters [sent by Riera have not] reached their destination."¹⁹ Similarly, because of the difficult communications between South American territories, Ana Périchon O'Gorman could not appoint a representative to liquidate her husband's business in Chile after his death. She left it to Jean Lasvignes's management, and contented herself with the information he communicated, waiting until 1819 to start a proceeding before the commercial court to collect the assets due to her.²⁰

¹⁸ In 1818, the company Strobel & Martini only had legal existence, as it had gone bankrupt in 1804 and been dissolved. Its former partner and director strived to recover the company's assets. About Strobel & Martini, see: Marzagalli 2015, 358-364.

¹⁹ AGN, TC, S-341, *Lynch Zimmerman y Cía a nombre de Strobel y Martini contra Jose Maria Riera*, 1818.

²⁰ AGN, TC, S-341, *Ibid.*

The revolutionary conflicts, followed by the wars with Brazil that troubled the River Plate from 1824 onwards, undermined not only the commercial information exchange across the Atlantic and between the River Plate and adjacent territories, but also the transport of products and passengers who migrated to work in firms managed by French agents. For instance, economic life in Buenos Aires was particularly troubled by the 1817-1820 crisis mentioned above. Thus, François Touchard, who settled in Buenos Aires in July 1818 and suffered from the crisis' consequences as soon as he arrived, was forced to recommend to his partner in Paris to "no longer solicit the emigration of workers until times get better."²¹

Despite the Buenos Aires' economic recovery of the early 1820s, the population suffered from conflicts in the Banda Oriental, which worsened after its incorporation into the Kingdom of Portugal in 1821, and then into the Empire of Brazil in 1822. The government of Buenos Aires considered the Banda Oriental as part of its territory, while many sectors in the Banda Oriental population asserted their desire for emancipation. These conflicts hindered the French trade in the region. On January 24, 1824, José Fortunato Pinto, passenger and shipper of the French vessel *Josefina*, sued French captain Fabio Jalabert in the commercial court for reparation of damages caused since their departure from Bahia. While the Brazilian imperial fleet blocked Montevideo, on November 11, 1823, the captain made his way on a dinghy to the coast against the charterer's and shippers' wishes, before a corvette conducted the ship into the port, where all of them were detained.²² Political and military conflicts made it difficult for the French to trade across the Atlantic, as well as in the region between Brazil, the Banda Oriental and Buenos Aires.

²¹ AGN, TC, P-259, *Peronard contra Touchard*, 1821, f. 86. All translations, from Spanish and French, are mine.

²² AGN, TC, P-250, *Pinto contra Jalabert*, 1824.

3.2. Business difficulties

The Independence and civil wars destroyed material and human resources, and affected merchants in Buenos Aires, who had to provide the armies with money, animals, goods and slaves, especially through voluntary and forced contributions, or confiscations (Halperín Donghi 2002, 84-85; Amaral 2018, 354-355; Moutoukias and ‘T Hart 2021). They endured sackings perpetrated by troops (Hora 2010, 30). Throughout the lawsuit against his partner, François Touchard repeatedly pointed out the deleterious consequences of this crisis, provoking the “paralysis” and “disorder” of business transactions.²³ In the 1822 French-language memoir he published in Montevideo, addressed to the French population of the city backing up his defense before the Buenos Aires commercial court, Touchard evoked “a disastrous era when the government of Buenos Aires [...] spread mistrust and discontent among citizens, when civil wars devastated the countryside and dried up all the channels of public prosperity.”²⁴ Indeed, the threat of a Spanish re-conquest expedition, the military setbacks of the Directory government in Buenos Aires, the collapse of the Directory and Pueyrredón’s power, the crisis of 1820, the declaration of provincial independences and the problem of the Banda Oriental, exacerbated the conflicts and seriously hindered trade (Verdo 2006).

Labor force was also lacking, due to enlistment, human losses and obstacles hampering workers’ immigration. French immigrants in Buenos Aires were concerned by military levies: in 1815, a decree required foreigners not in transit to join the army; with the law of April 10, 1821, Rivadavia went further and required that foreigners with at least two years residence in Buenos Aires serve in the militias, although transient foreigners were enrolled only in case of great danger. These laws ended up concerning especially French and immigrants from the

²³ AGN, TC, P-259, *Peronard contra Touchard*, 1821, f.19v.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, f. 86.

Italian peninsula, insofar as the British became protected by the 1825 treaty, as a result of Britain's recognition of the Confederation (Mariluz Urquijo 2002; Otero 2012, 90).

Such difficulties resulted in unpaid debts and bankruptcies. In a petition to the commercial court, Juan Pedro Varangot reported that the Buenos Aires government had decreed, on January 15, 1816, that the European Spanish residents in the capital and its surroundings had to be confined in the Guardia de Luján (Cristóforis 2009, 280). Because of this decree, Varangot, who had on several occasions lent money to Francisco Sarriera, a Spanish merchant, considered it "almost morally impossible" for Sarriera to repay him.²⁵

The difficulty to meet obligations did not affect only French merchants at a local scale. Although French traders progressively entered the River Plate market, benefiting from their access to products and credit sources in France (Hora 2010, 32), the revolutionary upheavals affected the circulation and transfer of credit across the Atlantic.

3.3. The difficult fluidity of credit relations in times of crisis

French merchants used credit instruments, especially negotiable commercial paper (bills of exchange, promissory notes), which became a major means of payment in international trade (De Roover 1953; Rogers 1995; Santarosa 2015). Due in part to the scarcity of cash that characterized the period, these credit instruments were widely used in the River Plate trade (Halperín Donghi 1982, 102-103; 2002, 76-120; Adelman 1999). However, the revolutionary upheavals made it difficult, not only to meet payments on time, but also to ensure the circulation of commercial paper, and so the fluidity of merchants' long-distance relations (Moutoukias 2018).

²⁵ AGN, TC, V-404, *Varangot contra Rosales*, 1816.

As mentioned before, in April 1821, Antoine François Leloir sued the French company Roquin, Meyer & Co. for payment of a bill of exchange. The lawsuit reveals how the bill circulated between France and Buenos Aires despite the obstacles to credit transfers, particularly during the 1820 crisis. Eleonor Foiron in Buenos Aires drew the bill on December 10, 1819. Unpaid and protested, it was followed by two returned bills drawn in Paris and Marseille by two different companies. As mentioned, Foiron had been sent to Buenos Aires as Lamotte, Maillet & Co.'s salesman. The bill he drew in Buenos Aires on Lamotte, Maillet & Co., worth 10,300 francs, was payable in Paris at two months sight. The next day, it was endorsed by the beneficiaries Roquin, Meyer & Co. in Buenos Aires to Jean Lasvignes, who was about to return to France.²⁶ On June 6, 1820, Lasvignes endorsed the letter to Bernadac, Regny & Co. in Marseille, who then endorsed it to Guerin de Foncin & Co. in Paris. However, in the meantime, Lamotte, Maillet & Co., the drawee, refused to accept the bill, protesting it in Saint-Valéry-sur-Somme on June 6, 1820. Thus, unable to recover the value specified by the draft from the drawee, Guerin de Foncin & Co. was forced to establish a protest and a return account on August 7, 1820, hoping to to be repaid by Bernadac, Regny & Co. in Marseille, who had endorsed the bill to them. These endorsement practices favored the circulation of credit instruments, as they permitted “the extinction of successive debts” resulting from business transactions, “without requiring the slightest use of cash” (Carrière 1973; Bartolomei 2008). At the same time, they permitted various French firms to take part in trade with the River Plate.

The returned bills drawn by Guerin de Foncin & Co. in Paris, and then by Bernadac, Regny & Co. in Marseille, depended on specific conditions which reveal how difficult credit relations between France and Buenos Aires became during the revolutionary conflicts. Negotiating the

²⁶ AGN, TC, *O’Gorman contra Laviña*, 1819.

protested bill implied paying a new exchange rate, regulated by the French commercial code. According to the return account established by Guerin de Foncin & Co., the last endorser of the draft Bernadac, Regny & Co. had to repay 10,465 francs, namely the principal sum of the bill (10,300 francs), the costs generated by its protests for non-acceptance and non-payment, and the costs of the negotiation of its return (bank commission, brokerage, stamp and postage of the return of the bill). The new exchange rate was added to this amount. On August 7, 1820, Guerin de Foncin & Co. turned to J. B. Lafitte, a broker near the Paris Stock Exchange, who negotiated the return of the bill on the Marseille firm to Abel Forué. Worth 10,504 francs, the return of the draft covered the 10,465 francs to be reimbursed by Bernadac, Regny & Co., and a 3/8% exchange rate loss. This corresponded to the exchange rate of Paris on Marseille. As stipulated in the Commercial Code, the re-exchange was determined by the exchange rate of the place where the bill had been endorsed or negotiated by the endorsers, on the place where the repayment was made.²⁷

At the same time, the broker certified that the exchange rate of Paris on Buenos Aires “would not be better than at 30% loss.” There was no significant exchange market on Buenos Aires in Paris at that time – little demand but also little supply of bills on Buenos Aires. Furthermore, the Paris exchange rate on Buenos Aires was more expensive than usual because of the 1820 crisis, marked by the courts’ and governments’ instability, according to the defendant appearing before the court to meet the unpaid bill. When news on the crisis troubling the River Plate arrived in Paris distorted by distance, the broker Lafitte had to certify the exchange rate, as there did not exist official quotations between Paris and Buenos Aires yet (Denzel 2010, 466; Demont, Scherman and Wegener 2018). He did so by “considering the dangers in the country”

²⁷ *Code de Commerce*, 1807, Livre I, Tit. VIII, §XIII, 179.

and certified the exchange rate at a 30% loss.²⁸ Trust, needed to favor credit relations, was undermined, both in the debtors' ability to pay on time and in the ability of the Buenos Aires' institutions to enforce payment of such a bill. Therefore, Guerin de Foncin & Co. drew the return of the bill in Paris on the Marseille firm. Such a decision, perhaps, was less risky than drawing a bill on a *rioplatense* merchant, insofar as Guerin de Foncin & Co. might not have developed its relations with Buenos Aires yet.

Then, the Marseille company, which had had to reimburse the last bearers of the draft drawn by Foiron, turned to one of the endorsers: since they were interested in transferring a credit to Leloir (with whom they had business relations), they drew the draft not on Jean Lasvignes, who had returned to France, but on Roquin, Meyer & Co. in Buenos Aires, the first endorsers, who would pay its value to Leloir. Besides, Bernadac, Regny & Co. drew a 14,950 francs draft, which included the 10,465 francs and an exchange rate at 30% loss of Paris on Buenos Aires, in conformity with the Parisian broker's certificate. It is worth pointing out that the Marseille firm did not know Roquin, Meyer & Co. and that the exchange rate was higher because of the crisis. Such an exchange rate, besides being conform with the broker's certificate, was perhaps a way, for the Marseille firm, to anticipate the risk of non-payment. Eventually, the exchange rate came to be disputed before the Buenos Aires commercial court. In Buenos Aires, Roquin, Meyer & Co. refused to accept this new draft "for not knowing the signature of the drawer or having any relation with him".²⁹ This unpaid bill led Leloir to sue in the commercial court.

To conclude, Roquin, Meyer & Co. had received 10,300 francs in December 1819, but had to pay 14,950 francs at the end of the circulation of the bill drawn by Foiron, after the lawsuit for

²⁸ AGN, TC, L-145, *Leloir contra Meyer*, f. 21. Joseph Meyer, partner in Roquin, Meyer & Co., testified about this crisis in his petition to the court.

²⁹ AGN, TC, L-145, *Leloir contra Meyer*, 1821, f. 14v.

their unpaid bill. Since they were one of the main French firms established in Buenos Aires, the loss they underwent did not challenge their position there. Although the French perceived the River Plate market's legal opening as an opportunity, this example shows how difficult the circulation of credit (and therefore business activities) became in wartime, in absence of official stock prices, although the Paris stock exchange was becoming important for Buenos Aires – an under-researched connection.

4. The unequal vulnerability of French merchants in Buenos Aires

Although they became more numerous, and were generally well received by the Buenos Aires inhabitants, French merchants were unevenly integrated into the local society (Djenderedjian 2008, 202-215). While some of them enjoyed high social and economic status, welcomed and recommended their compatriots, and helped as interpreters, others needed an interpreter to deal with local institutions, perceived the uncertainty of their condition as foreigners, and were more vulnerable to wartime consequences.³⁰

4.1. Being a foreigner: the “uncertainty” of French merchants’ condition

Whether they were passing through, recently arrived, or faced the difficulties of being foreigners, some merchants reported to the court they were vulnerable as foreigners in times of crisis. Being locally rooted brought “legal and social skills” (Cerutti 2002, 254) as well as economic, which permitted access to valuable information on local and regional demand, as well as developing business relations. On the contrary, lesser integration into local society undermined businesses. The experience of François Touchard upon his arrival in July 1818 illustrates how such difficulties prevented him from coping with the 1817-1820 crisis and complicated his defense before the commercial court. Touchard pointed out the consequences

³⁰ On the forms of integration of French merchants into the Cadiz society, see: Bartolomei 2017, 253-293.

of being a foreigner: “my sales [...] were precipitated [...]: many of the best items I had, because they were not well matched, lost their value” so “I had to buy some products from various French merchant captains.”³¹ As he needed money to establish his business, Touchard had to use half of the funds he had raised to establish his trading house. This forced him to sell in a rush the products he had introduced in order to reconstitute his funds. Without correspondents in Buenos Aires, he had a poor knowledge of local demand and came with too luxurious goods. He was forced to sell them at a loss and purchase goods that better suited demand.

Touchard also faced difficulties during the proceedings against his partner: poorly integrated into the Buenos Aires society, he could not present a guarantor for his defense – something the court had requested under threat of imprisonment. Touchard explained why he was unable to present such a guarantor: the accusations that his partner Jean Victor Peronard spread among the population and before the court, as well as the decree issued by the judges after the verbal hearing of May 22, 1821, “destroyed in a single stroke [his] credit and fortune, making it impossible for [him] to present the required bail. The rumour of the exaggerated sentence that Peronard spread [...] among the scarce relations of a foreigner, has inspired fear and mistrust even among the people most willing to vouch for [him].” This is why, as Touchard explained from his refuge in Montevideo in the 1822 memoir mentioned above, he was left without alternatives to prison: “As a foreigner in Buenos Aires, without powerful friends, without protection, what should I do? Submit myself to the rigours of fate and the injustice of men. I went to the civic district.”³² Touchard condemned the practices of the judges in charge in May 1821 and stressed how vulnerable could be a French merchant’s reputation, when he was not

³¹AGN, TC, P-259, *Peronard contra Touchard*, 1821, f. 19.

³² *Ibid.*, f.13v and f.86.

integrated into local society. He criticized such imprisonment because it prevented him from putting his business in order, presenting the accounts, benefiting from proceedings that would not undermine his business harder. Hardly integrated into the host society, Touchard was more exposed to the economic difficulties caused by the 1817-1820 crisis – which was taken into account by the arbiters appointed to resolve the dispute between the partners. In their December 1825 sentence, they asserted that Touchard “faced all the difficulties that a foreigner could suffer, such as the problem of language, a few items that were not suitable, and the sad time of his establishment.”³³

French merchants were generally well-received in independent River Plate, especially after Bernardino Rivadavia entered the government of Martín Rodríguez in 1821 and began promoting trade with France. However, they were vulnerable in some conjunctures and marked, if not by hostility, at least by suspicion (Otero 2012, 89). This was the case at the time of the “conspiracy of the French”³⁴. At the end of 1818, a group of former Napoleonic soldiers hatched a plot against Pueyrredón. Despite Pueyrredón’s projects of collaboration with Louis XVIII’s France, this reactivated suspicions against French immigrants who were pointed at as linked to the Napoleonic troops.

French merchants in transit lamented their vulnerability as foreigners. In March 1818, Luis Podesta, the ship *Ardito* French captain, asked the court for recognition of the ship’s damages. The proceedings provoked a dispute with one of the shippers. As it continued, the lawsuit entailed additional costs for the French captain who had to prolong his stay in Buenos Aires.

³³ AGN, TC, P-259, *Peronard contra Touchard*, f. 126.

³⁴ On the French conspiracy of 1795, see Johnson 2011, 149-178.

That is why Podesta demanded the dispute be promptly settled, “considering the prejudice caused to a foreigner as a result of his stay with the vessel.”³⁵

4.2. Lesser vulnerability of merchants integrated into local society?

Some French merchants were highly integrated into local society and enjoyed significant economic and social credit, which was essential for their business partners and for French immigrants and travelers in Buenos Aires. Their integration into the Buenos Aires society, their relations of solidarity, their credit, and their business strategies (Gervais 2015), enabled them to cope with the difficulties of the period. As we saw earlier, Leloir was well integrated into the local society, which permitted him, in September 1821, to ask the court for a suspension of payment, or delay, from his creditors. He presented the statement of his debts and assets, pointed out his good faith, how his economic situation resulted neither from “bad judgement” nor from an “imprudent way of doing business,”³⁶ and that his assets would be sufficient to reimburse his debts. After the creditors’ meeting, Leloir’s demand was accepted: the majority of the creditors granted him a 6-year delay and the court approved the decision. Unlike Touchard who, a few months earlier, had been treated as a debtor in bad faith, Leloir was familiar with the institution and benefited from close ties of solidarity within the Buenos Aires society. Although Leloir, who was related to Pueyrredón, may have been weakened by the collapse of the Directory, his position within the local society encouraged his creditors’ trust.

Some French merchants enabled compatriots to benefit from initial support upon their arrival in Buenos Aires, recommending them and helping them to enter into new business relations. In a petition to the court, Touchard related that, when arriving in Buenos Aires, he needed to pay the costs of his establishment and he could not get the support he expected from Leloir, who

³⁵ AGN, TC, P-248, *Podesta contra Bustamante*, 1818, f. 20.

³⁶ AGN, TC, L-145, *Leloir solicita de sus acreedores moratorias de seis años*, 1821, f. 2.

had taken Touchard & Co.'s products in consignment and was considered the French commercial agent: "far from finding help in Leloir, I was required within the following two months to pay the customs duties, [...] the value of the freight and commissions [...], to get a house in which to establish my warehouse [...]."³⁷ Touchard stressed not only the importance of Leloir for the newly arrived French merchants, but also the expected solidarity within the French community of Buenos Aires, and it is hard to tell why Leloir did not help Touchard. Similarly, Washington de Mendeville supported the newly arrived French migrants by welcoming them at his home. As a result of his position within the local society, especially thanks to his union with Mariquita Sánchez, Mendeville was appointed as general inspector of commerce in Buenos Aires by the French in 1825, before becoming the first general consul of France in 1827 (Ayrolo 1999).

Merchants who were well integrated into local society provided valuable help to compatriots who needed to deal with local institutions. During the lawsuit against his partner, Touchard had no choice but to turn to Juan Pedro Varangot to act as his guarantor. Thus, he turned not only to the community of French merchants in Buenos Aires, insofar as Varangot was considered being part of it,³⁸ but also to a merchant established since the beginning of the 19th century whose participation in the city's defense during the 1806-1807 English invasions had contributed to its integration into the local society (Mariluz Urquijo 2002).

Integrated French merchants were important resources for the local institutions and for French people in transit, especially when they were fluent in Spanish. Joseph Meyer acted as an interpreter when, in January 1824, the court clerk notified Fabio Jalabert, captain of the French

³⁷ AGN, TC, P-259, *Peronard contra Touchard*, 1821, f.19.

³⁸ On Varangot's French nationality, and the political issue which underlays it, see: Beraud and Mariño 2012, 3.

ship *Josefina*, of the court's decree in a proceeding that opposed him to Fortunato José Pinto.³⁹ Meyer was one of the partners of the company Roquin, Meyer & Co., one of the main French companies in Buenos Aires. As the naturalist Alcide Dessalines d'Orbigny reported around 1827, Meyer was one of the "most recommendable people in the city and the country,"⁴⁰ with whom close relations were worth developing.

French merchants integrated into local society were less vulnerable to the troubles the conflicts caused. In a general context of enthusiasm regarding their residence, and beyond the conjunctures of hostility, they coped with wartime consequences thanks to various business strategies.

5. Concluding remarks

I presented an overview of French commercial presence in Buenos Aires during the River Plate Independence and civil wars between 1816 and 1825, showing that the ability to integrate into former and new networks is one of the factors behind the growing presence of French merchants in the wartime River Plate. Beginning with an assessment of the French merchants who settled permanently in Buenos Aires, the study extended to the study of French traders in transit or who entered the *rioplatense* market while residing in France. Despite revolutionary turmoil, French businessmen became more numerous in the River Plate, where they arrived in search of new economic opportunities, and could acquire a significant position into the local society and its economic life. Despite economic difficulties and political and institutional instability, which hindered the circulation of credit and the continuity of business activities, French merchants consolidated their presence whenever they managed to integrate into local and regional

³⁹ AGN, TC, P-250, *Pinto contra Jalabert*, 1824.

⁴⁰ D'Orbigny, 1835, 80. Alcide Dessalines D'Orbigny stayed in Buenos Aires from January 1827, commissioned by the Museum of Natural History.



networks, and thanks to the articulation of new transatlantic business relations with the commerce of longer-established French merchants in Buenos Aires. The analysis of the circulation of the bill drawn by Eleonor Foiron in Buenos Aires highlighted that the extension of credit networks involved French merchants settled or in transit in Buenos Aires, as well as established in France, generating relations between traders without previous acquaintance.

This study also raises the issue of the legal institutions that helped French merchants to enter the Buenos Aires market and consolidate their presence, in a broader context when trade within and with the territories of the River Plate was difficult. In this respect, the Buenos Aires commercial court, which was used by French merchants, either immigrants or transient, was a crucial institution to secure the international transactions that helped connecting the River Plate to the North Atlantic economies (Manac'h 2021).

Moreover, while France's strategic interests in the region increased and further manifested after the United Provinces of the River Plate's Declaration of Independence and as Pueyrredón sought to have the independence recognized in Europe, the French government regarded the French merchants settled in Buenos Aires as interlocutors, treating them as intermediaries with the Buenos Aires authorities, as became Antoine François Leloir in 1817. Thus, regarding the growing importance of the River Plate for French political authorities, especially after the post-1815 imperial reconfigurations and in the context of rivalries with England, we should examine further how far these French merchants in Buenos Aires became key agents in reinforcing a multifaceted French presence in South America.

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